

Dragonshards

House Phiarlan, Part One

By Keith Baker



Few outsiders understand the inner workings of House Phiarlan and House Thuranni, and these houses of shadow would have it no other way. To the world at large the elves of Thuranni and Phiarlan are known as entertainers of the highest order. Those who know of the secret services these houses offer often assume that this work was adopted as a cover for espionage and intelligence, and that the house formed only after the Mark of Shadow appeared. Little could be further from the truth. The Mark of Shadow served as a rallying point, but the tradition of the houses stretches back long before the manifestation of the mark -- all the way to Xen'drik itself.

The first and most important thing to know about House Phiarlan is that most of the people of Khorvaire have no idea that the house is engaged in espionage work. The role of entertainer is not simply a cover. It is a tradition that dates back tens of thousands of years, and for many members of the houses, it is the only trade that they follow. Certainly, rumors state that the elves are spies and assassins, but to most people this is an urban legend. Where would the virtuoso soprano find the time to be a spy? She's known across Khorvaire for her talents -- do you really think she sneaks out and kills people during the intermission? In a world of changelings, doppelgangers, and rakshasa, the common folk have many other things to worry about. And if you walk into a Phiarlan enclave and ask to hire a spy, the coordinator will advise you to hire a Tharashk inquisitive. Phiarlan does possess one of the finest intelligence networks in Khorvaire, rivaled only by the Trust of Zilargo, but these services are available only to guildmasters and nobles, which are forces Phiarlan recognizes as players in the great game of politics and power.

So how do the twin paths of entertainment and espionage converge? Where did Phiarlan begin, and what role does it serve in the modern world? What caused the split between Phiarlan and Thuranni? To understand the present, let us begin in the past.

In the Beginning

The houses of shadow can trace their roots back to the Elven Uprising, the ancient war between the giants of Xen'drik and the ancestors of the modern elves. Many assume that this was a conflict between two monolithic entities, but neither elves nor giants were unified forces. Many different giant nations existed, and there were dozens of sects of elves, ranging from former slaves to guerillas who had fought the giants for millennia. Over the course of the uprising, some elves served as liaisons between the many different tribes. These travelers saw their role in war as being more spiritual than physical: Their task was to uphold morale and maintain the alliances between the scattered soldiers. They called themselves *phiarlans*, or "spirit keepers." These phiarlans learned the traditions and customs of all elven sects, and a phiarlan bard could inspire warriors from any tribe. The phiarlans were not generals or military strategists, but their motivational work and the intelligence they carried from place to place was an invaluable part of the military effort.

The Birth of Aerenal

In the end, pride, dragonfire and twisted magic brought doom to Xen'drik. In the last days of the war, a visionary leader gathered elves from across the continent and arranged an exodus to search for a sanctuary across the

water. Many of the phiarlans joined her cause, and their diplomatic skills and knowledge of the scattered tribes played a crucial role in the exodus. The journey was a long one, but the songs of the past and tales of glory helped soothe the fears of the travelers.

Eventually the elves found a new home in Aerenal, and they slowly claimed the land as their own. But in the time before the Undying Court, Aerenal was a very different realm from the ordered nation seen today. Most of the elves remained isolated in tribal communities, which ultimately evolved into the modern elven bloodlines. The phiarlans continued to serve as liaisons, working to strengthen the bonds between the bloodlines. Phiarlans would travel from court to court, performing the traditional arts of fallen Xen'drik and sharing news from other parts of the land. They also made an effort to look below the surface -- to seek out rivalries and schemes that might threaten the peace and balance between the lines. Typically a mediator would seek to settle disputes openly, but sometimes a phiarlan would quietly pass information to the parties that needed to know. This aspect of the phiarlan was well known, but accepted and even respected; a phiarlan might spy on your court, but he would only use that information for the good of the growing nation. If you had nothing to hide, you had nothing to fear; conversely, anyone who refused hospitality to a phiarlan clearly had something to hide. The reputation of the phiarlans was their shield, and their remarkable skill with song, dance, and other arts was the coin with which they paid their hosts.

The Rise of the Undying Court

Death has always been an obsession of the Aereni. Millions of elves died in the fall of Xen'drik, and the elves swore that they would never lose their heroes again. But different lines followed different paths toward this goal. The Priests of Transition studied ways to preserve the spirit beyond the death of the body. The line of Vol dabbled in blood magic and dark arts. And the Tairnadal sought to become vessels for the fallen through perfection of the martial arts.

In time, the Priests of Transition won the support of the majority of the Aereni. The path of the deathless relied on the veneration of life, while many saw the work of Vol as preying on the living to prolong the life of a few. Over the course of thousands of years, the Undying Court took form, and this served as an anchor that brought the lines together. The first conflict against the dragons cemented this unity. Following this first battle, the councilors of the Undying Court selected the first of the Sibling Kings, and modern Aerenal was formed.

With the Undying Court in place, laws were established to govern the land, and what had previously been a friendly alliance now became a true nation. In this era, the phiarlans moved from being pure mediators and newsbearers to actual spies. Tensions rose as the nation coalesced, and not everyone supported the rule of the Sibling Kings; in particular, the line of Vol rejected the teachings of the Priests of Transition. The phiarlans continued to carry the ancient forms of art and entertainment from court to court. But now family lords and the Sibling Kings paid them to monitor enemies, searching for signs of dissidence, rebellion, or feuds. While they began to take gold for these services, the phiarlans still saw themselves as peacekeepers: They brought light to the shadows so justice could find its way.

And then the dragonmarks appeared.

The Fall of Vol

The phiarlans had always been drawn from three different lines: Tialaen, Shol, and Elorrenthi. The Mark of Shadow first appeared on a member of Elorrenthi, but these lines had long mixed their blood and members of Shol and Tialaen soon manifested the mark.

Some say that the ascendant councilors of the Undying Court are among the only humanoids with the age or intellect required to study the draconic Prophecy. But living sages had made some study of the Prophecy in the wake of the dragon wars, and while the elves did not know the significance of the marks, they recognized them as playing a role in the schemes of the dragons. The elves first coined the phrase dragonmark, though few remember this. Fear followed the appearance of the marks. What was their purpose? What was the source of their power, and why had certain families been chosen? Given the long conflict between Aerenal and Argonnessen, anything tied to the draconic Prophecy was viewed with suspicion. This prejudice strengthened the bond between the three phiarlan lines, but it also pushed them away from the rest of the Aereni. The Sibling Kings quickly established their own security forces and relied on the Cairdal Blades and the Deathguard where they might have once used the phiarlans.

The rivalry between the Priests of the Transition and the followers of Vol had been building for thousands of years, and the appearance of the Mark of Death three thousand years ago simply made matters worse. The situation finally came to a head when the Cairdal Blades uncovered an alliance between Vol and a cabal of dragons. The extent and purpose of this alliance was never revealed to the public, but the Undying Court launched a full scale assault on the line of Vol. The Sibling Kings declared that the Blood of Vol was to be completely destroyed, since even a drop could destroy all living things. It was the first war between elves -- and the first time that dragons and elves sided against a common foe, since the forces of Argonnessen joined the Undying Court to destroy Vol and its allies.

This conflict shook Aerenal to its core, but in the end the line of Vol was exterminated. Some whispered that a single heir of the house, Erandis d'Vol, escaped the destruction -- but Lord Haensu of the Cairdal Blades claimed to have faced Erandis in battle and vanquished her. Still, the line of Vol had many followers who had no actual blood ties to the family, and these elves were given the choice of abandoning their vile traditions or leaving Aerenal. Many left, though not just the former followers of Vol numbered among them. Numerous Aereni believed that the shedding of elven blood had forever tainted the land, and those who bore the Mark of Shadow feared that they would be the next to suffer the fate of Vol. A handful remained, believing that it was their duty to the kingdom; these elves found themselves largely absorbed into other lines, and this mingling of blood causes the Mark of Shadows to occasionally appear in Aerenal. But most of the elves of Tialaen, Shol, and Elorrenthi fled to Khorvaire so that they could start anew. To mark their departure from elven society, they formally joined their lines into a new alliance: House Phiarlan.

Phiarlan in the Present Day

The elves had been uprooted from their home and their culture, and they intended to gain a secure position in this new land as quickly as possible. That meant amassing power. The people of Khorvaire had never seen anything to compare to the artistic skills and talents of the elves, and this sparked a renaissance in culture across the land. Elven entertainers were welcomed into every village and city, and in the process they gained knowledge and contacts. The elves of Phiarlan had spent over ten thousand years serving as the eyes of the Undying Court, and they put these skills to good use. And once they had sunk their roots deep into the land, the barons of the house contacted the other lords of the land, offering their services in exchange for gold or favors in days to come.

Today, Phiarlan's coffers are filled with gold and platinum. Its performers entertain viewers on the greatest stages and in the humblest taverns, and its eyes are watching even where no elf can be seen. Few commoners realize the true reach of the house, but kings and queens respect its power, and it is a force even the mightiest adventurers should treat with respect.

Next: A look at the public face of the House, and the services for which Phiarlan is known.

About the Author

Keith Baker has been an avid fan of **Dungeons & Dragons** since grade school. His life took a dramatic turn in 2002 when he submitted the world of **Eberron** to the Wizards of the Coast Fantasy Setting Search. In addition to developing the **Eberron** Campaign Setting and *Shadows of the Last War*, he has worked for Atlas Games, Goodman Games, and Green Ronin.

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